

Was Imām Aḥmad (d. 241) a Mufawwiḍ?

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

Yet another spurious notion often insinuated and invoked in creedal discussions is that Imām Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal adopted the approach of *tafwīḍ al-maʿnā* with respect to the *Ṣifāt al-khabariyyah*. This claim is based primarily (in fact, almost exclusively) on the following report which Shaykh al-Ḥanābilah Abū Bakr al-Khallāl narrated in his *Kitāb al-Sunnah* from Ḥanbal Ibn Ishāq (d. 271):

قال أبو بكر الخلال: وأخبرني علي بن عيسى أن حنبلاً حدثهم قال: سألت أبا عبد الله عن الأحاديث التي تروى: أن الله تبارك وتعالى ينزل كل ليلة إلى السماء الدنيا، وأن الله يرى، وأن الله يضع قدمه، وما أشبهه. فقال أبو عبد الله: تؤمن بها ونصدق بها، ولا كيف ولا معنى، ولا نرد منها شيئاً.

“I asked Abū ‘Abdillāh [Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal] about the *aḥādīth* narrated: Allāh descending every night to the heaven of the *dunyā*, Allāh being seen [in the Hereafter], Allāh placing His Foot [upon the Hellfire], and the likes of these [reports about the *Ṣifāt*].”

Imām Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal answered, “We believe in them and affirm them, **without [question as to] how (kayf) and without meaning (maʿnā)**, and we do not reject anything from it.”¹

Firstly, the authenticity of these words is subject to dispute. If a position or statement attributed to Imām Aḥmad by one of his students has *tafarrud* (i.e. if it is only transmitted by one of his companions) and the pupil in question is rejected for his solitary reports, the narration is not considered reliable. One could argue that the primary transmitter of the above translated report (Ḥanbal Ibn Ishāq) is susceptible to this scrutiny² and hence the narration shouldn’t be accepted, but this line

¹ Ibn Qudāmah al-Maqdisī, *Dhamm al-Taʿwīl*, ed. Dār al-Baṣīrah, p. 22

² See: Ibn Rajab, *Fath al-Bārī fī Sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, ed. al-Ghurabāʾ, vol. 7, p. 259; and [here](#).

of reasoning can be (and has been) countered as well. Although this narration from Imām Aḥmad via Ḥanbal does have a basis, its alternate wording (see point three) can be argued to take precedence.

Secondly, Ḥanbal had asked Imām Aḥmad about the *aḥādīth* of the *ruʾyah* (Allāh being seen in the Hereafter) **as well as** the other *aḥādīth* regarding His attributes (namely *al-Qadam* and *al-nuzūl*). This is crucial, because Imām Aḥmad answered for **all** of these *aḥādīth*—without differentiating between them—by saying we ought to affirm them “without modality (*kayf*) and without meaning (*maʿnā*).” If we were to understand “without *maʿnā*” to mean “without understanding from it any meaning,” we would be led to conclude that not only did Imām Aḥmad do *tafwīd* of the meanings of *al-nuzūl* and *al-Qadam*, but that he did *tafwīd* of the meaning of the *ruʾyah* as well! We can confirm that Imām Aḥmad did not do *tafwīd* of what it means to “see Allāh”;³ nobody did *tafwīd* of this except some of the Jahmiyyah.⁴ Therefore, because one cannot interpret “without meaning” to entail *tafwīd al-maʿnā* without falling into this absurdity, we must conform to another understanding.

Thirdly, there exists another wording transmitted by Imām al-Marrūdhī (d. 275) from Imām Aḥmad which can help clarify the meaning of Ḥanbal’s narration:

قال أبو عبد الله: ونحن نؤمن بالأحاديث في هذا ونقرها، ونمرها كما جاءت بلا كيف،
ولا معنى إلا على ما وصف به نفسه تعالى.

“Abū ‘Abdillāh [Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal] said, ‘And we believe in these *aḥādīth* (concerning the *ṣifāt*) and affirm them, and we pass them along as they have come without how (*kayf*) and without [assigning] a meaning (*maʿnā*) **besides that [meaning] which He described Himself with.**”⁵

The qualifier “besides that which He described Himself with” clearly indicates that the attributes are to be affirmed while leaving them upon the meanings which they

³ See: *Al-Jāmi‘ ll-‘Ulūm al-Imām Aḥmad*, vol. 3, p. 368 onwards.

⁴ See: Abū Sa‘īd al-Dārimī, *al-Naqḍ ‘alā al-Marīsī*, ed. al-Shawāmī, p. 61

⁵ Ibn Baṭṭah, *al-Ībānah al-Kubrā*, ed. Dār al-Rāyah, vol. 7, p. 58

have come with. This would stipulate that the meanings of these attributes are first known, which foundationally conflicts with the notion of *tafwīḍ al-ma'nā*. This alternate wording thus clarifies that the words “without *ma'nā*” in Ḥanbal’s transmission should be understood to mean “without distorting its meaning.”

Fourthly,⁶ other students of Imām Aḥmad—and even Ḥanbal Ibn Ishāq himself—all transmitted reports from the Imām which demonstrate he was not a Mufawwiḍ.

Abū Ṭalib narrated that Imām Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal said:

وقال أبو عبد الله: قول الله تعالى: ﴿هل ينظرون إلا أن يأتيهم الله في ظلل من الغمام والملائكة﴾، ﴿وجاء ربك والملك صفا صفا﴾، فن قال: إن الله لا يرى، فقد كفر.

“Allāh said, ‘Do they await but that Allāh should *arrive* to them...’ [and He said], ‘And your Lord will *come* and the angels [as well], rank upon rank,’ so whoever says that Allāh cannot be seen, he is a disbeliever.”⁷

This report shows that Imām Aḥmad understood the **meaning** of the coming (*majīʾ*) and arriving (*ityān*) of Allāh, since he utilised these attributes to prove that He can be seen. Imām Aḥmad definitely could not have used these *Ṣifāt* as evidence for the *ruʾyah* unless he understood their meanings and connotations.

On this point, al-Qāḍī Abū Yaʿlā (d. 458) said:

وقد قال أحمد في رواية أبي طالب ﴿هل ينظرون إلا أن يأتيهم الله في ظلل من الغمام والملائكة﴾ ﴿وجاء ربك والملك صفا صفا﴾ فن قال أن الله لا يرى فقد كفر. وظاهر هذا أن أحمد أثبت مجيئ ذاته، لأنه احتج بذلك على جواز رؤيته، وإنما يحتج بذلك على جواز رؤيته إذا كان الإتيان والمجيئ مضافاً إلى الذات.

And Aḥmad said in the *riwāyah* of Abū Ṭalib, “[Allāh said], ‘Do they await but that Allāh should *arrive* to them...’ [and He said], ‘And your Lord will *come* and the angels [as well], rank upon rank,’ so whoever claims

⁶ This section is largely based on [this article](#), pp. 31–33.

⁷ Ibn Baṭṭāh, *al-Ibānah al-Kubrā*, vol. 7, p. 53. It was authenticated by the *muḥaqqiq*.

that Allāh cannot be seen, he is a disbeliever.” The apparent of this is that Aḥmad affirmed [Allāh] comes with His Essence (*majīʾ Dhātihi*) because he used [His coming] as evidence that He can be seen. This cannot be used as proof for the *ruʾyah* except if the *ityān* and *majīʾ* are of the Essence.”⁸

Al-Ḥāfiẓ Ibn Baṭṭah (d. 387) reports that Imām Aḥmad also used the descent (*nuzūl*) of Allāh as evidence that He can be seen,⁹ which demonstrates that he was able to deduce from the meaning of *al-nuzūl* that it can facilitate for the *ruʾyah*.

Similarly, when asked by al-Marrūdhī concerning ‘Abdullāh Ibn al-Mubārak (d. 181) affirming a *ḥadd* (demarcation) for Allāh,¹⁰ Imām Aḥmad said, “This has reached me from him,” and he thereafter cited the *Āyah*, “Do they await but that Allāh should arrive to them...” and the *Āyah*, “And your Lord will come and the angels [as well], rank upon rank.”¹¹ Imām Aḥmad cited these attributes as evidence that Allāh has a *ḥadd*,¹² which again isn’t possible unless he understood their meanings.

Imām Abū Bakr al-Marrūdhī reported:

ورأيت أبا عبد الله يشير في حديث الخبر؛ حديث ابن مسعود، [...] يشير بأصبع أصبع.

“And I saw Abū ‘Abdillāh [Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal] **gesturing** when relating the report concerning the Jewish rabbi; the *ḥadīth* of Ibn Mas‘ūd. [This is the *ḥadīth* in which the Jewish man stated, ‘Allāh will place the heavens on a Finger...’] [Imām Aḥmad] pointed to each [of his own] fingers.”¹³

Imām Ḥanbal Ibn Ishāq also transmitted this gesturing from Imām Aḥmad.¹⁴

⁸ Abū Ya‘lā al-Farrāʾ, *Ibtāl al-Taʾwīlāt*, ed. al-Najdī, p. 158

⁹ Ibn Baṭṭah, *al-Ibānah al-Kubrā*, vol. 7, p. 326; from Ḥanbal from Imām Aḥmad:

ونزول وخلوه بعده يوم القيامة، ووضع كنفه عليه، هذا كله يدل على أن الله يرى في الآخرة...

¹⁰ Muḥammad Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *al-Muntakhab min Dhayl al-Mudhāyyal*, p. 145; Abū ‘Umar Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr, *al-Tamhīd*, ed. al-Furqān, vol. 5, p. 154, Abū Bakr al-Bayhaqī, *al-Asmāʾ wa al-Ṣifāt*, vol. 1, p. 1072

¹¹ Ibn Baṭṭah, *al-Ibānah al-Kubrā*, vol. 7, p. 158–159. It was authenticated by the *muḥaqqiq*.

¹² This was also said by al-Ḍashtī (d. 665) in *Ithbāt al-Ḥadd li-Allāh*, ed. al-‘Utaybī & ‘Ādil Āl Ḥamadān, p. 118.

¹³ Al-Khallāl & Ghulām al-Khallāl, *Kitāb al-Sunnah*, ed. ‘Ādil Āl Ḥamadān, vol. 2, p. 479. It is authentic.

¹⁴ Ibid.

This act clearly necessitates understanding of the connotative meaning of Allāh's Fingers (*Aṣābi*); how else would Imām Aḥmad know what to point towards?

Fifthly, Imām Aḥmad's students also seem to not have believed he was a Mufawwiḍ.

ʿAbd al-Malik al-Maymūnī (d. 274) reported from Imām Aḥmad:

من زعم أن يده نعماه، كيف يصنع بقوله: ﴿خلقت يدي﴾ مشددة، قال الميموني:
فقلت: وحين خلق آدم بقبضة يعني من جميع الأرض، والقلوب بين أصبعين.

“Whoever claims that His Hands are (a metaphor for) His blessings, how can he reconcile [that reinterpretation] with His statement, ‘...I created with My two Hands,’ [38:75] with a *shaddah*?” [The *shaddah* on ‘*bi-yadayy*’ causes ‘with My two Hands’ to be in the dual form.]

Al-Maymūnī said, “So I said, ‘And [how can he reconcile that reinterpretation with the *ḥadīth* which mentions that Allāh] grasped [with His Hand] from the earth when creating Ādam, or [with the *ḥadīth* which mentions that] the hearts are between two Fingers [of Allāh]?’”¹⁵

Imām Aḥmad here is arguing that linguistically, the word “*yad*” in its dual form and in this manner cannot be understood as a metaphor; Imām al-Maymūnī added that the *aḥādīth* which describe Allāh's Fingers and Allāh grasping with His Hand also disprove that His Hands are metaphors. How could he have deduced the correlation between the “Hands” of Allāh as mentioned in 38:75 and the reports of Allāh's grasp or His Fingers if he didn't know the meaning of any of these attributes? Thus, since it is known that Imām al-Maymūnī was not a Mufawwiḍ,¹⁶ it follows that he would not have made this comment after transmitting these words from Imām Aḥmad if he had known Imām Aḥmad to be a Mufawwiḍ either.

We also find that Imām Ḥarb Ibn Ismāʿīl al-Kirmānī (d. 280), as he was expounding upon the creed of Imām Aḥmad, affirmed movement (*al-ḥarakah*) for Allāh.¹⁷ This is

¹⁵ Abū Yaʿlā al-Farrāʾ, *Ibtāl al-Taʿwīlāt*, p. 202; Al-Khallāl & Ghulām al-Khallāl, *Kitāb al-Sunnah*, vol. 2, p. 485.

¹⁶ See al-Qāḍī Abū Yaʿlā's comments in *Ibtāl al-Taʿwīlāt*, p. 202.

¹⁷ Ḥarb Ibn Ismāʿīl al-Kirmānī, *Kitāb al-Sunnah*, ed. ʿĀdil Āl Ḥamadān, p. 50

a term not explicitly affirmed in the Qurʾān or Sunnah, which entails¹⁸ that Imām Ḥarb had contentiously deduced *al-ḥarakah* from the meanings of other attributes, such as Allāh’s descent (*al-nuzūl*), coming (*al-majīʾ*), and arrival (*al-ityān*). It would be incorrect for him to have done this if Imām Aḥmad’s creed was instead *tafwīḍ*.

Other students of the Imām, like ‘Abd al-Wahhāb (d. 251),¹⁹ Ibn Qutaybah (d. 276),²⁰ and ‘Abdullāh (d. 290),²¹ also had no issue with affirming a meaning for *al-istiwāʾ*.

All in all, the claim that Imām Aḥmad was a Mufawwiḍ of the meanings of some of Allāh’s attributes is a weak assertion which cannot be appropriately defended.

والحمد لله وحده، وصلى الله على سيدنا محمد، وآله وصحبه وسلم.

¹⁸ Ibid.; see Shaykh ‘Ādil Āl Ḥamadān’s footnote.

¹⁹ Al-Dashtī, *Ithbāt al-Ḥadd*, p. 71; Abū Yaʿlā, *Ibtāl al-Taʾwīlāt*, p. 592. He explained *al-istiwāʾ* to mean sitting.

²⁰ Ibn Qutaybah, *Taʾwīl Mukhtalif al-Ḥadīth*, p. 394. He explained *al-istiwāʾ* to mean settling.

²¹ ‘Abdullāh Ibn Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal, *Kitāb al-Sunnah*, ed. ‘Ādil Āl Ḥamadān, p. 30. Near the beginning of his work, he narrated from Khārijah Ibn Muṣʿab al-Ḍubāʿī (d. 168) that *al-istiwāʾ* means sitting.